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Industrialization, Environmental Ethics, and Women's Survival: Rethinking Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* Through Ecofeminism

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Abstract
Kamala Markandaya's Nectar in a Sieve (1954) provides a close view of life in rural India during times of economic development, industrialization, poverty, and environmental uncertainty. The arrival of a tannery brought employment and commercial activity to the village, but it also brought about changes in agriculture, interpersonal relationship and the land itself. Rukmani, the protagonist, experienced the transformation directly through poverty, her multiple family duties and her dependency on nature. This paper examines the novel through an ecofeminist perspective, focusing on industrialization, environmental ethics, and women's survival. It argues that Markandaya questions the assumption that industrial development necessarily produces equitable social progress. The novel shows that development can create opportunities while simultaneously weakening the security of communities dependent upon agriculture. Rukmani's experience lies at the heart of this tension, since her life is intimately tied to soil, crops, rain, seasons, food production, and household duties. Yet her bond with nature ought not to be read through the essentialist notion that women are inherently closer to nature. Instead, her ecological consciousness emerges through labour, material dependence, and lived experience. The paper further argues that an ecofeminist reading should not simply identify women with nature. Here, Rukmani's bond to the earth is shown to grow out of her bodily, working life. Thus, Nectar in a Sieve remains relevant to discussions of sustainable development, environmental justice, and women's survival.
Keywords: *Kamala Markandaya, Nectar in a Sieve, ecofeminism, industrialization, environmental ethics.*

Introduction

Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* is a significant contribution to Indian writing in English published in 1954 which narrates the life story of Rukmani. Her existence revolves around the hardships of rural life including poor standards of living, reliance upon farm work, domestic duties and fragile climatic conditions and suddenly her life changes with the establishment of a tannery in her village.

At first, the tannery stands for a chance at economic opportunity. It offers jobs, boosts business activity, and introduces in new ways of earning a living. Yet as it expands, it changes the village's social and economic makeup and brings uncertainty to those who depend upon farming for their livelihood. Markandaya thus portrays development as a complicated process, not simply as progress that should be accepted without question.

An ecofeminist reading has its relevance because it demonstrates how the issue of ecology can be closely linked with issues of gender, class and race. Ecofeminism examines the relationship between the exploitation of nature and systems that create inequality among human beings. In Markandaya's novel, the damage to rural life cannot be separated from the problems faced by women who depend on agriculture and are responsible for maintaining their families.

This paper argues that *Nectar in a Sieve* shows industrialization as an ethical as well as an economic phenomenon. It also argues that Rukmani's relationship with nature is based on lived experience rather than an idea that women are naturally closer to nature.

Rukmani and the Natural World

Rukmani's life is closely connected to the natural world; after her marriage, she began developing a garden near her home. This garden eventually became an important source of both food and joy for her. Her understanding of gardening, including plants, soil, rain, and cultivation, developed through her daily experiences.

Looking at nature, Rukmani doesn't see pictures - she sees how it feeds her. A good harvest can provide food, while drought or crop failure can bring hunger. The land also gives her a sense of identity and stability in an otherwise uncertain life.

Mount (2011) emphasizes the importance of Rukmani's relationship with the natural environment. Her relationship with nature is best understood as the result of lived experience. She knows the land because she works with it and depends upon its productivity.

Her experience reflects a central idea of ecofeminism: environmental problems often become problems of everyday survival. Women, who often manage food, cultivation, childcare, and

household responsibilities, are particularly affected when environmental conditions become uncertain. In Rukmani's case, any change in the agriculture immediately affects the well-being of her family.

The Tannery and Industrial Change

The tannery is the major symbol of industrialization in the novel. At first, it looks like progress brings benefits; jobs open up, money flows in. Yet slowly, things change - the old ways fade, what once felt like home shifts beyond recognition.

What matters is not merely the fact that the tannery is an industrial building. It stands for a different understanding of land. For Rukmani and Nathan, the land is ties to food, labour, family, and belonging. In the context of industrial development, land turns into a resource available for economic use.

This contrast produces the novel's central conflict between land as a source of livelihood and land as an economic resource. The villagers rely on the land to survive, whereas industrialization judges the land by how economically useful it is. Markandaya thus reveals that development can generate new opportunities even as it removes older kinds of security.

Industrialization and Environmental Ethics

The novel raises a basic question: Does economic development always lead to human progress? The tannery creates employment and new economic possibilities, but these benefits are not distributed equally. Those who mostly affected by these changes are always the ones making the decisions. This is a significant issue within environmental ethics. Environmental shifts can impact various social groups in unequal ways.

In *Nectar in a Sieve*, impoverished villagers possess little economic or political influence because they depend on farming, they become particularly exposed when the land and village economy change.

Shiva (2010) similarly argues that development models can undervalue subsistence economies and the work performed by women. This idea is relevant to Rukmani because much of her labour is necessary for family survival but is not treated as economically important. The novel thus suggests that development should be evaluated by more than economic expansion. It should also be judged by its effects on people, livelihoods, and the environment.

Women's Survival

Rukmani's experience demonstrates how economic and environmental insecurity can become gendered. She is responsible for food, children, household management, and family well-being. Consequently, changes in agricultural productivity and household income place additional pressure on her. Her troubles can be linked to the land as well. If the crops fail the household receives less food. If the prices rise, the household gets tougher to manage. If income is less predictable, the household becomes more difficult.

The story indicates too that the hardships that women encounter are not one in the same for each one. Rukmani and Kunthi encounter circumstances and different responses to hardship. The women in the story would not be placed into one category and respond to hardship according to their individual situations.

Rukmani's strength is shown through her ability to continue despite repeated difficulties. She does her job, maintains her household, and accommodates elements of her environment beyond her control. She does not enjoy her deprivation of wealth and prosperity; it is simply the way that those with little choice manage to survive.

Rethinking Ecofeminism

An ecofeminist reading of *Nectar in a Sieve* should avoid the simplistic claim that men destroy nature while women protect it. Such an interpretation would reduce the novel to a gender binary and overlook its more complex representation of environmental dependence. Here Nathan too has a dependence upon the land, and he suffers a sense of loss with a destruction of his security of food supply. Therefore affect men as well as women.

A more practical method is to look at the relationship among gender, class, labour, economic development, and environmental dependence. Rukmani experiences these changes in distinct ways owing to their household and caring responsibilities, yet environmental insecurity impacts

the broader community. It develops through work and material dependence. She understands the land because she cultivates it, depends upon its productivity, and experiences the consequences when it fails.

Rukmani's connection to the natural world is not based on any idea that women are inherently caring than men, just the opposite, it stems from her real life interaction with it. She knows the land because she works on it, depends on it, and understands what happens when it fails. Her relationship with nature is therefore both practical and emotional.

Contemporary Relevance

Even though *Nectar in a Sieve* was released over seventy years ago, the issues it explores are still relevant. Communities are still impacted by industrial growth, changes in agricultural land, environmental decline, and rural insecurity.

The novel also poses questions that are still significant today: Who benefits from development? Who bears its costs? What becomes of those whose livelihoods depend on land that is being commercially transformed?

Recent studies continue to examine the novel through ecofeminist and ecological perspectives (Gadhia et al., 2024; Tiwari & Wani, 2023). These studies demonstrate the continuing relevance of Markandaya's exploration of gender, development, and environmental dependence.

Conclusion

Nectar in a Sieve presents industrialization not merely as economic change but as a transformation that affects land, livelihood, social relationships, and human security. The tannery represents the promise of progress, but its growth also creates insecurity for people whose lives depend on agriculture. Through Rukmani's experience, Markandaya demonstrates the close relationship between environmental conditions and human survival.

An ecofeminist reading further reveals the importance of women's labour and domestic responsibilities without assuming that women are naturally closer to nature. Rukmani's ecological awareness develops through her practical relationship with land, agriculture, and family survival. At the same time, Nathan's dependence upon the land demonstrates that environmental insecurity is not exclusively a women's issue.

The novel finally encourages readers to reflect on what development truly means. Economic growth cannot count as genuine progress if it weakens the conditions that sustain human life. *Nectar in a Sieve* retains its importance because it reminds us that land is far more than an economic asset. It is equally a source of food, identity, livelihood, and survival. Thus Markandaya's novel conveys a simple yet lasting environmental lesson: human progress must be considered together with the well-being of the natural world and the people who depend upon it.

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